

Crime Interrupted
An AFP and Casefile Presents podcast.
Episode 3, Operation Streambank transcript.

Host – introduction

The Australian Federal Police – or AFP for short – is Australia’s national policing agency. Its aim? To – outsmart serious crime with intelligent action. Officers from the AFP work with local, national, and international agencies to combat serious criminal threats. Their work includes counter terrorism, serious organised crime, human trafficking, cybercrime, fraud, and child exploitation. The AFP exists to disrupt major criminal operations. In 2020-21, they did that over 400 times. They seized 38 tonnes of illicit drugs and precursors, and assisted overseas police services in seizing 19 tonnes of drugs. The AFP charged 235 people with child exploitation, and charged 25 people following terrorism investigations.

We’ve got exclusive access to the AFP case vault and personnel to provide you with in-depth insight into how they investigated and interrupted the most serious of crimes to stay a step ahead.

[theme music]

Host

Around the world, many thousands of people are caught up in romance scams each year and the cost runs into hundreds of millions of dollars. People online might spend months connecting with their ‘soul mate’ – someone who seems to be everything they’ve ever wanted. Then, there is a request for money. For travel, a sick relative, for tickets to finally meet. And then something gets in the way of meeting. More money is sent. And then more. When family and friends tell the victim they’re being scammed, the victim can withdraw from them, leaving only the soothing words of the scammer. And the scammers are good at what they do, trading on love and connection.

When a middle-aged South Australian farmer called Des Gregor began talking to a woman online called Natacha in December 2006, he had no idea she didn’t exist. Her picture – the one she shared with him – had been lifted from a website called Hawaiian Babes. But Des wanted to believe that she was what she purported to be: a sympathetic Christian woman who had been caught up in a refugee camp in Mali, a landlocked country in West Africa.

Des Gregor

I was looking through a number of sites on the internet. I clicked on to her and she seemed to be everything that I was looking for. And so things just developed from there. It was all via email. No phone calls.

Host

Of course, Des had been wary at first. When Natacha gave him information, he didn't just take it on face value. He tried to verify as much of it as he could, but some information was impossible to check.

Des Gregor

She sent a passport to verify that she was genuine. I did send that to Immigration, and they told me that they weren't allowed to give out information, whether it was a true passport or false, which I thought afterwards was a stupid idea because it could have saved a lot of problems had it been notified that it was a false passport.

Host

Not only did Des do the best he could to verify that Natacha was who she said she was, over the months they corresponded, he heard her story through the messages and emails they shared.

Des Gregor

Her father was supposed to have been in jail, and I wanted an explanation as to why that was. She explained as to why she was in the refugee camp. And that was supposedly for her security. Supposedly, her father had worked hard and was awarded gold as a bonus, and that was put into a security company.

Host

Sometimes, the story seemed too far-fetched for Des, especially when Natacha asked for money. The gold, she wrote, was in a security company and money had to be paid for it to be released.

Des Gregor

At one stage I kind of wasn't feeling right, and I said, 'Look, you're pushing too much for money. Why don't you get your minister to pay the money to the security company? And then he can have the money, like the church can use the money and help the refugee camp.' Oh no, but he can't do that. And I think one of the excuses was it was left in trust in the company for Natacha for when she got married. She had to be married to get it and that couldn't be broken.

Host

As with all scammers, it didn't take long for the appeals for money to escalate. For a kind man like Des, it was only natural that he would want to help out this woman he was growing fond of. She was in a refugee camp. Her son was sick and needed to go to hospital.

Des Gregor

Basically, she wanted the money for hospital, for food, and she wasn't getting well cared for in the camp, not the necessities of life, and so she needed money to buy that. I think the largest

amount of money I'd sent her in one hit was when she wanted hospital money. And that was \$800.

Host

Despite wanting to help her, Des knew some of the things that Natacha said to him didn't sound quite right, and one email, he even took over to his brother's house to run it by him.

Des Gregor

One of the emails came back, and I thought: *well, this sounds too good to be true*. And my brother just had a visitor at that time. So I thought, I'll take the email over to them and get them to read it. And they said the same as me, that there was something fishy in that email. But then with what they'd suggested was fishy, and what I thought was fishy, I sent questions to her, but the unfortunate thing was, she always had a good answer for what I was sending. You couldn't kind of break her and say, okay, there's a lie here. So, you just had no alternative, but to believe what she was writing. But at the time, I just assumed that she was being honest, but found out later she wasn't.

Host

Natacha was everything Des wanted. When he told her he was a Christian, she said she was a Christian too. Des even exchanged emails with her minister. When her young son got sick, Des sent her money for the boy's treatment. All up, Des sent Natacha over \$10,000. After a six-month courtship of e-mails, Des agreed to travel to Mali to marry Natacha and bring her back to Australia.

Des Gregor

They are surely experts. There's no doubt about that, and the way they manipulate you and work things, it sounds all 100% legit.

Host

Des moved from exchanging emails with Natacha online to buying a ticket to Mali. What made him take that next step?

Des Gregor

Well, I had to find out whether she was genuine or not, and basically I was believing her, but I probably did have a little doubt in my mind because in the end, something happened to her that she couldn't meet me at the aircraft. And that's where I should have smelled a rat.

Host

Right from the start, the scammers preying on Des brought religion into many of the conversations. When Natacha said she couldn't meet Des at the airport, she promised her minister's son would meet him instead.

Des Gregor

It was the pastor's son that was going to meet me. And I thought, well, if you're a minister of religion or a pastor, you shouldn't tell lies. Well, actually at the time, I thought you won't be a liar if you're a minister or a man of religion.

Host

Of course, Des assumed that the minister was real too.

On the 26th of July 2007, Des flew out of Adelaide, bound for Mali. When he arrived at the Mali Airport the following day, Des was approached by an airport worker who helped him through the Mali Customs area. When he was asked for several cash payments, he just thought, *that must be how they do things in Mali.*

Des Gregor

I went straight through that airport with no questions, no filling out paperwork. All I had to do is pay a doctor so as he'd pass that I'd had vaccines before coming. And somebody also I had to pay, and then I was just rushed off. And they said, 'Well, your taxi's waiting there for you.'

Host

The airport worker delivered Des to a waiting vehicle and the unsuspecting South Australian farmer was driven to an undisclosed location.

Des Gregor

I was pretty well hurried up into the car and moved on. Then I was taken to the taxi and taken to then the house where I was kidnapped.

Host

Natacha was not waiting for Des at the house. As soon as the door opened, Des knew he was in trouble.

Des Gregor

I was led into the house by what appeared to be two normal guys. They were carrying my bags. They opened the door, and I was met with another two guys, one with a handmade pistol, another one with a machete.

Host

Des was strip-searched by the group of men, who demanded money. The hostage takers took all the cash Des had on him. They also took his credit cards and tried to withdraw cash from them. The problem for the kidnappers was that Des didn't have PIN numbers. His transactions required a signature.

Des Gregor

Next morning, they were pushing me for pin numbers for the credit cards and all that. And the threat was on. If you don't give it, we'll kill Natasha.

Host

By then, Des was less worried for the safety of Natacha, because he realised that even if she was real, she had caused this to happen to him. Once the kidnappers realised he didn't have more money on him, they forced Des to contact friends and relatives in Adelaide and request that funds be electronically transferred to a Western Union outlet in Mali.

Des Gregor

I didn't carry a lot of money with me, only a bit over a thousand dollars. Then they said, 'Well, if we can't get the money from you, have you got any friends with money? You'll have to start ringing them.' So then I had to start ringing them. And thankfully, I'd also previously told them that the year before was a bad year for the farmers and that a lot of them were struggling and needed all the money they had, so you wouldn't be getting money out of the farmers. And so the first two or three I rang, they all said, 'No, we can't help you as much as we'd like to.' And then the next thing I think I had to ring my brother, because they knew I had money. And so they said, 'Well, he'd be your next of kin. He can draw the money out and send it.'

Host

And once Des called his brother Phil back in South Australia, Phil knew something was wrong. The origins of Operation Streambank began when Phil contacted the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade – or DFAT – and told them that Des had been in touch, asking for money. Phil read between the lines and feared his brother was being held for a ransom in Mali.

Des Gregor

My brother was pretty smart. The moment I'd rang him, which would have been the next morning, he thought something's not right. And so he contacted, I think it was the embassy, from the embassy to the federal police and then the local police.

Host

Des lived on a farm in rural South Australia, and his brother Phil lived on a farm nearby. Once the case was raised, AFP agents drove out to meet Phil so they could make an assessment about the case. It was clear from the beginning that Des had been scammed in the most dangerous way.

Once Des's predicament was reported, it fell under the jurisdiction of the AFP whose job it is to protect Australian citizens all around the world. The first contact was through the South Australian Police – or SAPol for short.

Steve Mullins retired in 2016 as a Detective Superintendent with the AFP. His career with the Federal Police has taken him to jobs all around the world, but even so, a kidnapping of an Australian citizen in Mali in a romance scam was like no case he'd ever investigated before.

Steve Mullins

Phil and his wife went to the police to say that they thought Des was in trouble in Africa and SAPol referred them to the AFP. And I got a phone call saying there's some people here that

are concerned about an Australian citizen overseas. So I came in and had a conversation with Phil and his wife, and sent some officers to the farm with Phil, so that we could have a look at his computer, and also try and find some clues or evidence as to where he was, how he got to be there, who he'd been in contact with on the computer, and then as a result of that, when the officers returned, they said, yeah, they share the concerns of the family, but it still could be that Des has gone of his own free will, but he's just asking for money because he's run into some bad luck in, in Africa.

Host

With a high likelihood of a kidnapping on their hands, Steve Mullins and his team had to act quickly. There were protocols about how to deal with kidnappings, and Steve himself had trained and worked as a police negotiator, so he knew how these cases worked. But given the precarious nature of what the AFP was facing with this particular case, they needed to think outside the box. The first thing they did was move Phil and his wife down to the Adelaide CBD and set them up in an apartment where they could be coached when Des called again.

Steve Mullins

We were able to fairly quickly establish an investigation room in an apartment hotel in Adelaide, away from the AFP office, to wait and patch the phones through from the farm and from Phillip's farm into this room so that we could have a listened in to the phone calls, if any more phone calls were going to come in, which we did. And in the meantime, I reached out to the South Australian Police to have access to their police negotiators team. The AFP has a police negotiators team, but that's in Canberra, but we do train and work together, the federal police and the state police, and we have done for many years in police negotiation, training and tactics. So we got the police negotiators into our operations room. We introduced them to the family. We had the first phone call come through. And after that call, we all got together and made an assessment that this looked real, that Des was in trouble.

Host

As soon as South Australian police negotiator, Lindy Baker, got the call from Steve, she agreed to help.

Lindy Baker

And I got a phone call from Steve Mullins, AFP negotiator and a Commander. And we all know each other around the state. So he rang me and said, 'Oh, we've got a bit of an incident going in the country. We'll need negotiators. Can you help?' And I said, 'Sure. Of course we can. We'll do whatever we can to help you.' So I had brief details that involved a possible kidnapping of a gentleman that had gone overseas.

Host

Lindy cleared it through her chain of command and was designated a senior officer as her liaison. Once an operation like this starts, information is released strictly on a need-to-know basis.

Lindy Baker

Because once we start doing this type of job, you have to keep it secret or as secret as possible. And work away from the mainstream police. So it's a needs to know basis. So that was my first thing was getting a team together of at least four is our basic team to do minor type jobs. And then as they're bigger jobs, you can grow out to six or 10 or more, depending on the types of things you have to do.

Host

The number of negotiators required for Operation Streambank was 12. The job needed teams of negotiators around the clock. And it wasn't just negotiators that were needed. The team also required a huge amount of technical support.

Lindy Baker

Another thing is when we have the equipment and set up, people who are invaluable, are the radio technicians, because the minute anything breaks, none of us are technicians or clever in that way. You absolutely need them near to take all that away from you so that you can do your job. So I rang there and said, 'Right, we've got a job. It may take a few hours. It may take a couple of days. I don't know.'

Host

Once they were set up and ready to go, Operation Streambank began in earnest. Lindy appreciated Steve's background as a negotiator. It made their communication so much easier.

Lindy Baker

When you've got a commander running it in the AFP who was at the time a negotiator, absolutely different. They know exactly, and it saves so much time and we were on the same page. I mean, we had plenty of discussions over different things along the way as you always would, but it wasn't all that extra time of having to say, 'Well no, negotiators do this this way for this reason. And if you do that, it'll...' All that went. We all knew, or that being on the same page.

Host

With Steve's experience as a police negotiator, what did he notice about that first phone call that rang alarm bells?

Steve Mullins

There was duress in the tone of his voice that we picked up. But essentially it was the feedback from Phil and his wife that Des sounds as though he's really in trouble. He doesn't sound like himself. And it's very unusual for Des to be asking for money in that way and in those terms.

Host

Because Des was guarded in what he was saying, in those early days, the negotiators were looking for concrete signs of what was going on in Mali. For SAPol negotiator Lindy, there was one phone call that convinced her that Des was in real trouble.

Lindy Baker

You treat it as real until proven otherwise. That's how we work in all jobs. And you have to do that. We had some phone calls, we had strange people on there, like the pastor in the refugee camp. And that was the point for me that I went, 'Nup, this is real.' He was a beautifully spoken man and a West Indian accent. And one of those very ah, you know, molasses voices, and he just chatted about him and he said, 'He's okay.' And then he said, 'And don't ever call him again,' and I went, 'Ooh, don't like this.'

Host

Once Operation Streambank was set up, Steve reached out to an AFP colleague in Pretoria for help.

Steve Mullins

What we did is we reached out to AFP international in Canberra and asked for our liaison officer in Pretoria, South Africa, if he could travel to Mali and make contact with the local police and await further instructions till we found out more, which we did. That was federal agent Gary Wynch, so we sent him to Mali and then he was giving us feedback in terms of what capability we were able to access on the ground, and some of the challenges that we were going to be faced if we were going to try and find Des.

Host

Steve and the SAPol negotiating team made a decision from the start about how to communicate with Des. Putting family members or civilians on the phone is a tactic known as a third person intervention. But there is always a risk.

Steve Mullins

Golden rules of police negotiation is that you don't put relatives on the phone with what we call the stronghold, the stronghold being the place where the person is being held hostage. And we don't do that because there is always a possibility that whoever's taking the person hostage, will get some satisfaction out of doing something to that person whilst a relative is on the phone. But in the circumstances that we have, we just thought at that time, and we all agreed as a team because we all knew the golden rule is we don't have third party intervention as we call it. What we usually do is we put a trained police officer on the phone, who does the talking with the stronghold, with the people who are making demands. We have a lot of training and strategy around how we deal with that. And it's been very successful for us in the past. So we all agreed that we continue on until something changes, because at that stage, the stronghold had no idea that the police were involved and neither did Des. So that worked in our favour. It bought us more time. We thought that keeping Phillip talking to Des on the phone was the best way as not to alert the kidnappers at the other end, that the police were listening in and involved.

Host

Right from the start, the AFP team and the SAPol negotiators were impressed with the way Phil and his wife handled the calls from Des.

Steve Mullins

Phil was remarkable in terms of his calmness and his willingness to interact with the police negotiation team who were coaching him literally through every phone call. So before every phone call, we would have a strategy meeting with Phil, and we'd discuss our strategy and what we wanted him to talk about, but more importantly, what we didn't want him to talk about. And then whilst the calls were taking place, we would be sitting in a room surrounded by white boards, and trained negotiators would be writing things down, prompting Phil to talk about certain issues. And then also prompting him to say, 'Don't speak about this. No, don't continue that conversation.' And he was very good at playing that role. Des really does owe his life to how Phil managed that whole role of communicating with him during the time that he was with us, and also owes his life to Phil for alerting the police that Des was in trouble.

Host

When the AFP searched Des's farmhouse, they took his computer and found travel documents that might prove helpful. They quickly pieced together the story of how Des had come to be kidnapped in Mali.

Steve Mullins

There was a treasure trove of information on Des's computer. We established fairly quickly once we got it back to examine it that he'd been communicating by email, with someone claiming to be a lady called Natacha, and Natacha claimed to be a single mum, who had access to, I think about a hundred thousand dollars' worth of US gold bullion, was looking for a husband to come over to Africa and rescue her from Africa with her gold bullion, and bring her to Australia. A photograph on one of the emails was found from this so-called person called Natacha. And it turned out to be a cut and paste from a website called the Hawaiian Babe's website. It was of a woman with olive complexion in a swimsuit, very glamorous looking woman. And this is what Des sort of, I suppose fell in love with when he was communicating with this person by email.

Host

A couple of days into the negotiation, an email came through from Des's account. It was obvious to everyone that Des had not written it.

Steve Mullins

We showed that email to Phil and once we'd read the email, realised it wasn't written by anyone with a true grasp of the English language. Phil said straight away, 'That's not written by Des.' It was just another piece in the puzzle to confirm to us that Des was in trouble and under duress.

Host

The more days dragged on that Des was being held by the unknown kidnapers, the more dangerous it became. The SAPol negotiators were very careful to draw out the process while

the AFP tried to figure out a way of finding Des. But every day, Des sounded more and more desperate during the calls. But what was worse, was when Des stopped calling.

Steve Mullins

The conversation with Des was always about money on every call. Please send money. If you don't send money, things could get quite bad for me because you know, I can't get Natasha back to Australia. He was starting to get quite emotional, asking for money as the calls went on. And of course, we were always trying to push the conversation with Des towards another day, like we'll get back to you tomorrow with some more information about the money. And then we got to a point where there was a blackout. The phone didn't ring.

Host

The blackout lasted three days where there was no communication with Des – no proof of life – and the entire crew of police negotiators and the AFP team working Operation Streambank grew more worried each day. The AFP went through Des's computer and emails. There were numerous emails from Natacha and people purporting to be her friends. Some emails included phone numbers. The team rang all the numbers they could find.

Steve Mullins

Going back through the computer to try and find phone numbers or emails or contacts that we could initiate contact through Phil to try and see whether we could re-establish contact with Des and the stronghold. And there was this character called Father someone, in the emails who was making contact with Des as well, on behalf of this Natasha person saying, 'Oh yeah, she's a great lady. I really trust her, you know, you two are going to be great together,' all that kind of stuff. This guy actually picked up the phone, one day, and it was one of our police officers that was on the phone, and one of our negotiators, and we just told this person that we were from the Department of Foreign Affairs, and we'd been speaking to Phil and we just trying to find out if Des is okay, because we hadn't heard from him for a few days and they were concerned. This guy got quite defensive on the phone, but later that day, the phone rang and Des was back on the phone. So thank goodness, Des was alive. So as negotiators, we always try and look for proof of life every day.

Host

There was much relief in the negotiation room when Des called again. But even so, everyone knew that time was running out for Des if the Operation Streambank team didn't think of a way to locate and rescue him. In the meantime, Gary Wynch, the AFP agent from Pretoria, travelled to Mali to get the lay of the land.

Steve Mullins

We did a lot of research very quickly on what's the political situation, and then the security situation in Mali. What's the capability of the military and the police to effectively manage the rule of law in the country where we could potentially task the local police to go looking for Des. And so our information coming back from Gary Wynch in Africa was without some sort

of better intelligence about where Des was located, we were going to really struggle to find out where Des was. So as time went on, we ran out of excuses as to why we weren't sending money.

Host

Aside from trying to rescue Des, the Operation Streambank team needed to keep news of his kidnapping out of the media. Their fear was that if it hit the newspapers, the kidnappers would cut their losses and kill Des. Since he had reached out to the farming community for money, there were a lot of people who knew or suspected that something had happened to Des.

Steve Mullins

And the community out where Des lived was great in that we went and saw those people that Des rang on the telephone, and we told them, please not to engage with any phone calls from Des or from anyone else that you didn't know, because we thought Des might be in trouble. And we also asked them, please don't tell the media that we've been there to visit them. We didn't want the media publishing information about Des potentially being kidnapped overseas. And they were fantastic. All those people kept their word and if he did call one of the other neighbours looking for more money, when Phil was saying, look, there's not enough money, then we could be sure that we were the only ones dealing with Des and the stronghold.

Host

Because of the time difference between South Australia and Mali, negotiators worked through the night in rotating shifts. For SAPol negotiators, even in the downtime, their minds were racing with possibilities. Lindy knew this because she would often get calls in the middle of the night from her crew members who had finished their shifts hours ago.

Lindy Baker

I don't think any of us had any good night's sleep. You... takes a long time to wind down and you think about everything. You know, we even had times when a team'd knock off and go home and you get a call from one of them in the middle of the night and they'd say. 'I thought of this. Have we tried this? Have we done this so?' Well funny you should say that. We all just discussed that. And yet just did that, thanks.' Yeah, it's very hard to wind down.

Host

While the whole team of Operation Streambank were working night and day in Adelaide trying to find Des, he was being kept in a single room under constant guard. On the first day, Des had been badly beaten with a machete.

Des Gregor

They weren't probably doing physically much to me other than on the first day they gave me a bloody great belting with a machete. And after I was captured, they got a doctor in to dress it. Other than that, I wasn't treated too badly. Like I say, I'm probably one of the better ones that was treated. Only thing was when I had to make a phone call, it was always on loudspeaker,

and I had somebody right alongside of me that was ready to grab that phone if I said the wrong thing.

Host

An irony of Operation Streambank was that while Des was sitting surrounded by members of the kidnapping gang being coached on exactly what to say on the phone, his brother Phil, half a world away in Adelaide, was surrounded by police negotiators telling him exactly what to say. For AFP operative, Steve, it was a game of cat and mouse.

Steve Mullins

I know that they were beating him before they put him on the phone to make sure that he said what he was meant to say. We were in a bit of a mental game with the kidnappers where we were effectively coaching Phil what to say on the phone. And they were doing exactly the same thing, but more violently with Des, getting him to say what they wanted on the phone from the other end.

Host

While the AFP team could hear the duress in Des's voice when he made the calls, Des himself wondered if he would survive the ordeal.

Des Gregor

Probably after the second to third day, um, I had the suspicion and the thought that I may never get out of here. And I did say to them at one stage, 'If you're going to kill me, do it now don't wait another fortnight.' Or whatever. And, I can't understand these blokes; they claim to be Christians, but they said, 'Do you realise that the good Lord, won't put more on to you than you can bear?' And I thought: *you mongrel*.

Host

Part of the AFP negotiation process was to get as much information as they could. This strategy provided perhaps the only light moment in the whole affair.

Steve Mullins

As a team, we sat around and we thought okay, how do we get the stronghold to establish whether Natacha is real or not. So, we pushed Des through Phil to say, 'Des, you keep telling me you're in love with Natacha and that you're there with her, and she has a child, but we've never heard from the Natacha. You've never put Natacha on the phone. And then we told Phil to say something like, 'Des, it would make me feel a lot more comfortable about sending more money if I could speak to Natacha on the phone and that we could be introduced.' To our amazement, this voice came on the phone and it was immediately apparent to all of us sitting in this room with our headphones on that we were listening to a man pretending to be a woman. And of course, it took all of our energy, not to burst out laughing, and even Phil recognised straight away that it was a man pretending to be a woman in that high pitched voice that men

try and do, when they try and speak like a woman. So that was uh, certainly one highlight for us in the entire two weeks that just reinforced to us the people we were dealing with.

Host

While the phone call negotiations continued in Australia, Steve was in constant communication with Gary Wynch in Mali.

Steve Mullins

Every day, I would speak to Gary and tell him what happened on the phone, what was said. And then he and I were also exploring other opportunities where potentially we could use other assets to find telecommunication signals coming out of Africa, where we could potentially find where Des was located. We explored all those challenges and opportunities again, without success. Gary was tasking the local police to reach out to their human source network to see whether there's chatter in the street or the markets about a foreigner being kept in a house somewhere. So we could potentially narrow down a search area to go and send the police to go and look for Des. But essentially all that came to zero.

Host

When a week had passed after Des's kidnapping, the Streambank team was running out of ways to delay paying the money for his release. The Australian government never pays ransom money. If they did, they would put every Australian tourist in potential jeopardy. But the situation was tense in that rented apartment in Adelaide. In the phone calls, Des was sounding increasingly desperate. Des's brother Phil agreed to send a small sum of money to show the kidnapers Des had value.

Steve Mullins

Because once we reach a point where Des is of no value to the kidnapers, then there's a really good chance they would get rid of him, that he would come to some harm or be killed. So we sat Phil and his wife down and we told them that we were running out of options here. And they, uh, they decided that they would send a small amount of money through Western Union. And I think it was about uh, two and a half thousand dollars. The cash was sent via Western Union, uh, to a designated recipient being Des at the other end. And before we sent the money, we engaged with Western Union to see whether we could actually have the money sent to one location and tell Des that there was only that one location so that we could do a potential stake out and catch the kidnapers, or at least follow the kidnapers back to the stronghold to find Des. But unfortunately, Western Union weren't able to, to help us in that regard. And they said that their systems is such that anyone could walk into an over 400 outlets of Western Union in Mali, present identification, and pick up the money. So the money went through and then of course there was a renewed vigour or renewed confidence in Des's voice when they received the money and he was on the call, the next call after that.

Host

Any kidnapping is a delicate operation. Investigating and negotiating over two continents had its challenges. While Australia didn't have an embassy in Mali, Canada did, and the Operation Streambank team wondered if they could use this.

Steve Mullins

By day nine or day ten, you really are struggling to come up with another excuse as to why you can't send money the next day. I sat around with the team and came up with an idea that let's try a strategy whereby we tell Des that there's money waiting for him at the Canadian embassy.

Host

With the renewed optimism felt by Des and the team back home after the money came through, the AFP team capitalised on that.

Steve Mullins

So we thought, okay, this is good. This is good. So we then put the strategy to the family that we're going to play this scenario out where we're going to tell Des is that all he has to do is go to the Canadian embassy and there's 30,000 US waiting for him inside, all he has to do is go inside and pick it up. So for the next two to three days after that, when Des was asking for more money to be sent by Western Union, Western Union, we would always be moving Phil away from that conversation during the call, and becoming firmer with Des during the calls about he wasn't going to send any more money by Western Union. Phil told Des, as part of the strategy that, 'Happy to send that first batch, but just to make sure that you're all right, Des. There's two reasons why we want you to pick up that money from the embassy. One is we want the embassy people to say you're fine. And secondly, it's a secure place to pick up that amount of money.' For the next two or three days, that was the strategy. We kept pushing and pushing for Des to agree to it. And then he agreed. He said, 'Yeah. Okay, I'll go tomorrow. So we all waited, obviously alerted our Gary Wynch inside the Canadian embassy to hopefully await the arrival of Des to come in and pick up his money.

Host

Des had landed in Mali on the 27th of July. It was now the 8th of August, and 12 days since he'd been kidnapped. There were so many things that could go wrong at this stage of the plan. The team of Operation Streambank waited anxiously in the rented apartment with Phil and his wife. At this stage, there were really only two ways it could go. Either Des would arrive at the embassy to collect his money. Or he wouldn't.

Steve Mullins

And to our absolute astonishment, a car pulled up at the front of the Canadian embassy and Des got out, walked into the Canadian embassy and was met straight away by Gary Wynch and told straight away that he'd been scammed, and that Natacha wasn't real and that he can't leave the embassy until it's safe.

Host

As soon as Gary Wynch had Des safely in his custody, he wasted no time ringing the team in Adelaide to tell them the good news.

Steve Mullins

We were all overjoyed when we finally got the phone call from Gary telling us that he had Des and that Des was safe. It's a moment I'll never forget. We were so grateful that Des was safe, but also for Phil and his wife, because they were so grateful that Des was safe, but we actually couldn't believe that the scammers took the bait and let him go out of the car. So, there was a great deal of pride in all of us that our strategy worked, because we ran out of options, and we thought this was our last throw of the dice to get Des out.

Host

When they heard of Des's rescue, Lindy and her team of negotiators cheered. It had been such a tense couple of weeks.

Lindy Baker

Steve said to me, 'He's going in. He's doing that.' Um. Everybody was so relieved because of course the doors are slammed shut behind him. And, you know, 'You're safe now. This is the story and we've got you, but the relief. Everybody screams with, with joy and there was jumping up and down, like I suppose, watching a football team win, that sort of thing.

Host

When Des walked into the embassy, Gary Wynch saw his desperation to collect the money to save Natacha's life.

Steve Mullins

And Gary was telling us on the phone that Des was just distraught because he demanded that he leave the embassy because if he didn't, they would kill Natacha and her child. And he honestly believed that at that time.

Host

Des's instructions from the kidnappers were to go to the embassy, collect the money and drop it off at a Catholic cathedral.

Des Gregor

I had to go to the Canadian embassy and then I had to take the money to a Catholic cathedral and meet somebody there. That's how on the last day or so, that I finished up at the embassy.

Host

While Des claims to not have been treated badly by the kidnappers, after the initial machete attack, they worked on him in more subtle ways during his 12-day incarceration.

Des Gregor

They'd say, 'If you don't return, your brothers aren't going to care because they'll get your farm, and that's all they're waiting for. They don't want you to return.' And I wouldn't argue with them because I knew that arguing would create more problems. Although I did at one stage say, 'Well nah, I know my brothers better than that. They wouldn't do that.' Then they'd say, 'If they loved you, they would voluntarily give this money just to see you come back home. The problem was if they gave the money, were you going to return home? You're between the devil and the deep blue sea, because if you give them money, they could kill you. Or, if you don't give them money, they can still kill you. I didn't have any faith in being let go. I was pretty confident that I wasn't gonna make it. I would be dead.'

Host

After Des's rescue, the AFP flew him back to Australia for a debrief. He was able to tell them about his 12 days, held captive by the unknown kidnappers.

Des Gregor

There was a mattress on the floor. In another little cell, there was a toilet and a shower, and there was always one person there to keep guard on you. So there was no way that you could even consider making an attempt to move. There was one window to the west. And I'd look out that window. And I got told the first time, 'Keep away from the window.' And it was basically if somebody saw a white man in there, they'd know something wasn't right. So I'd actually stand way back from the window and look out, and they seemed to accept that. I was allowed to have a wash once a day. Go to the toilet when you like, because there was no way you could escape from there. I'm not sure how many meals a day we got, but I reckon it was two at the most, some days it might've only been one, depending on what you got. Most times it was McDonald's, or something of that kind, kind of a hamburger. Nothing better than that or nothing worse than that. So, it was reasonable tucker, but small amount.

Host

When Des walked into the Canadian embassy, did he expect to be rescued?

Des Gregor

I probably was in two minds as to whether I would get out, but I was hoping that once I got inside the embassy, I should have been safe, and that they could have held me and watched over me. When I got into the embassy, they said, 'Well, you're safe here now.' And I thought, well, I guess they can't get in here because it was pretty secure.

Host

When Des didn't arrive at the cathedral with the cash, one of the ringleaders of the kidnapping gang telephoned the embassy. The call gave the AFP one last opportunity to scam the scammers.

Des Gregor

Probably a good half an hour afterwards, the bloke that was the big leader in it, he rang the embassy and he asked where I was. They told him, 'Well, we don't know where he is because we put him in a taxi and sent him to the cathedral. So if he's not there, he's got the money and found a hotel or found somewhere to stay and he'll be out the country with the money.'

Host

It was a stroke of genius; the kidnappers thought Des had left the embassy. For Steve Mullins and Operation Streambank, it was a great result.

Steve Mullins

It was a great satisfaction for us at that point to know that we'd scammed the scammers. It was just a remarkable feeling, remarkable for all of us involved. And, all of us have been working such long hours over that two-week period, we were exhausted. All of us were exhausted and, just an amazing feeling, an amazing sense of comradery between all of us.

And also for Gary in South Africa. Was amazing to get on the phone and speak to him and thank him for all the work that he'd done, and how he managed to make all that work. You know, he'd got on a plane from Pretoria, with instructions to go to Mali. We think there's been a kidnapping of an Australian citizen. We don't know any more.

Host

Even though Des knew he was safe, the kidnappers had threatened him and after suffering the 12 days of kidnapping, it took him a long time to realise they weren't coming after him.

Des Gregor

Even the flight home had us all a bit worried because we didn't know if one of their mob would get on the plane. So, I had security all the way, but for a long time, I wasn't allowed to stay on my own because they threatened that if I managed to get away, they would get into this country, and they would somehow get me. And so for six months or more, I was pretty well contacted to make sure that I was all right, and I had my nephew. He... I think he stayed with me for six months.

Host

Right from the start, Des was willing to talk publicly about his kidnapping – to stop it from happening to others. The AFP had used all its resources to disrupt the gang who took him, but others might not be so lucky. Given the years that have passed since his ordeal, Des has tried to use his Christian beliefs to help him. Has he come to a place of peace and forgiveness?

Des Gregor

I have, but those four, I still think if I come across those, I'd unleash anything I could on them for what they did to me. I know it's wrong. And I know I've got to get that thought out of my head. They say you can forgive, but you don't forget so.

Host

The four men who scammed Des and kidnapped him were never brought to justice. During negotiations with the Mali police, they suggested allowing Des to leave the Canadian embassy so they could follow him, but that was never going to happen. There was no way the AFP would secure an Australian hostage, and then send him back to his kidnappers. Anything could go wrong in that scenario. Des had no idea where he'd been held, and the taxi that deposited him at the embassy drove off before police could follow it. But even if the police had been able to stop the taxi, it hadn't picked Des up from the stronghold. The kidnappers had made him walk several kilometres before hailing the taxi.

It is evident that the criminal syndicate were highly organised in Mali. From the time of touchdown, Des was affectively in the custody of the kidnappers. They facilitated his passage through Customs, the collection of his baggage, and his delivery to a waiting vehicle. Des never had a chance. Steve Mullins knows that these scams will continue.

Steve Mullins

The Internet's made it so easy for them to reach into people, lonely people, and convince them that these people are real and that relationships are real. They've come up with so many ways in which to manipulate people's emotions and emotional response to situations to get them to physically send money, in support of their scams. It's a huge industry.

Host

Bringing Des home from Mali was a win for the AFP. Operation Streambank was a huge learning experience. For Steve Mullins, it reinforced the international capabilities of the AFP.

Steve Mullins

The takeaway from, for me from Operation Streambank was the capability that the AFP has in terms of being able to reach out across the world, in support of Australia and its citizens. The thought that's gone into how the AFP is set up and where we strategically locate our assets and our people really came to the fore in this case. It was only a few years prior to Streambank that we establish an office in Pretoria, so the strategic thinking behind establishing an office there was on the money because Streambank was the perfect case where on a phone call, I could speak to an Australian federal agent in Pretoria, in South Africa have a conversation with them about what I'm doing in Adelaide and how can they help me and then pushing that person forward into Mali, to make whatever engagement in support of what I'm doing. Just fascinating to be able to see that in real life, and with such a great ending, a great result to see those resources being used in such a positive, and an effective way.

Host

Given the organised approach of the kidnappers, it was highly likely they would repeat what they did to Des. Accordingly, Des has some advice to offer.

Des Gregor

My suggestion would be, pay their airline ticket, get them out here. If they're prepared to do that, then they're genuine or hopefully they're genuine.

Host

For Steve Mullins, Operation Streambank showed the effectiveness of international cooperation.

Steve Mullins

We've become extremely professional in the way that we engage with other policing agencies around the world. And it's a credit to those that have worked in the international network over the last 40, 50 years, that they've built these significant relationships of trust with police forces on every continent, around the world. And how we're able to, through that established relationship and partnership of trust, have those police forces help us in support of what we need to do to protect Australia and Australian citizens.

Host

And as well as protecting Australian citizens, the AFP will always try and disrupt these romance scam networks.

Steve Mullins

One thing that came out of Operation Streambank was that we realised that there is a significant organised crime business sitting behind these scams, and that we need to work not only internally in Australia, but we also need to work with our partners in law enforcement overseas to do what we can to disrupt what's going on. We'll never stop it entirely, but if we can continue to disrupt what's happening, then it makes it a lot harder for these scammers to, to do their work.

Host

For Steve Mullins, Operation Streambank was one in a long line of career adventures with the AFP that has taken him and his family around the world. While he retired in 2016, he has continued to serve as an AFP Reservist. The AFP Reserve has been set up so that former members like Steve who have incredible experience can step in and do short term roles even after they've left the AFP. The AFP knows that it's hard for police officers to step away from law enforcement entirely, so the Reserve gives ex-members the opportunity to re-engage with policing and continue to serve their community. And of course, the added bonus is, that at any given time, the AFP has access to an incredible bank of skills and qualifications that they can call on at short notice to interrupt crime.

Steve Mullins

Absolutely fascinating career in the AFP over 30 years. I joined in 1983 and finished in 2016 and the opportunities that were presented to me, almost from the day I joined were fantastic. I joined the protective security side of the AFP first and then was able to undertake general duties training. And then from there I was able to train as a detective. And from there, I was able to take postings anywhere in Australia. From that point on that was remarkable for me, but also

remarkable for my family, that they enjoyed the travel. I got a phone call at home from the commissioner on a Saturday morning, Mick Keelty. He said, 'Would you like to go to Ho Chi Minh City and open an office for the AFP?' People just don't get those kind of phone calls. And of course, you immediately say yes. Which was then a whole different and amazing opportunity to represent the AFP and Australian law enforcement overseas. And then taking a team of police to Afghanistan to disrupt the Taliban drug trade, and support Australian forces on the ground in their country, and then later, being posted to New Guinea as a police liaison officer for three years, which was a fantastic adventure. I'm amazed when I talk about some of the things that I've been able to do, and some of the places, some of the experiences I've had, that I would never have been afforded that opportunity if it wasn't for the AFP. Just a fantastic organisation.

Host

For the AFP, Operation Streambank showed that international law enforcement partnerships are the cornerstone to cripple transnational crime. This case is just one example of how the AFP works in the international law enforcement space. Increasingly, crimes like this are borderless. The rising incidence of multi-jurisdictional crime, gender violence, murder of Australians overseas, kidnap for ransom, piracy – just to name a few – means the AFP has to continually re-evaluate its approach. What worked in Operation Streambank, might not be successful again in the future.

Serious crime is getting seriously complex. To stay a step ahead, the AFP is recruiting those with diverse skillsets and backgrounds – just like AFP personnel Steve and Gary and the role they played in rescuing Des from the Mali kidnappers as part of Operation Streambank.

After all, it takes all kinds to solve crime. With more than 200 roles across the organisation, in Australia and across the globe, you could help the AFP stay a step ahead too. Consider a career with the AFP.